



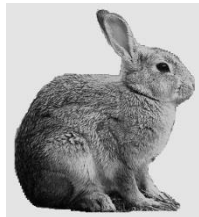
TRACES

Kevin Graham

Smithereens Press

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TRACES

Who ever made a ritual of cinders?

- Pablo Neruda, 'Sonata and Destructions'

Afterthought

i.m.

Before he died, before the stiches burst
and he bled out on the hospital floor,
he came and offered me snow in a dream.

He approached the task as in his life:
resourceful, strong; blue hands working
overtime, analysing the freshest pockets

in the garden to hand me in big clumpy
fistfuls.

‘The fuck are you doing?’ I said.
He smiled and pointed up at the sinking

flakes, how they shouldered his coat,
caught in his eyelashes, melting into tears.
A scratching noise made me turn towards

a shadow hidden in the undergrowth.
The white was coming thick and fast
and I was running out of words.

Gemini

Scooped like a prize
into a white nest of coddled
towels, nostrils flaring
in the all-too-quick air,
its release a map of panic
and sudden sky, belly
pushing up, squeezing in,

lungs whirring into autopilot,
as natural to the open
world as a terrible minute
later when they coaxed
my lifeless twin, limp
from asphyxiation, more
bloody-blue than pink

and in the silence I couldn't
have known the memory
of his foot trailing mine,
my older brother, in his infant
wisdom, having sensed
my leaving first – the cord
gripping his baby-neck –

tapping me on the ankle
to let me know there'd be
a time when hunched
over the side of the bed
I'd be wrestling with a sock,
my heart dipping like
a robin, and I'd know.

Traces

There are things we used to do
like drift under autumn's bright occasion,
how death comes in a thousand colours,
a single crushed reminder.

The air sharpens, tickles where neck
and shoulder meet, loosening a bolt of shivers.
The morning's risen, the mile-long stream
of traffic into town a slow-moving

dream in which drivers contemplate
their lives, unable to lift their heads
in the direction of the park where a colonnade
of oaks breaks sunlight into bars

and flycatchers breakfast on the wing.
The memory of that morning
will come back when, for reasons
better known to yourself, you stepped out

of the car like a movie star, an accuracy
flooding in the margins, a warmth
rising in the blood; all of your futures
suddenly jabbering in unison.

Swim

I want to tell you – as the light goes out
on another Dublin winter, the skint trees
all wet with tears of rain – that I remember
every detail of the morning you led me
down the steps that summer, under a drove
of sun-kissed orange groves, the dawn sky
effervescent with possibility, light breaking
the swaying plush of leaves, your eyes –
those eyes I took to knowing as my own –
still shiny from last night's burnt absinthe
hallowed on your tongue, sober enough
to tiptoe over stones before the Adriatic
caressed our naked ankles, its furling waves
a chemistry of joy I wanted to hold and have
eclipse the full moon of my heart before
crashing into foam, bubbles frothing open
as we struggled for the currency of weight,
my body keeling like a boat until you played
Jesus and levelled me in your arms and –
this is the only point I'm trying to make –
the trapped echo I'd carried for so long,
polished clean from nights of bitter calm,
floated between both endless blues, drifted
in a kind of miracle release: already memory,
already a tipping point lifting in the past.

Seascape

(after Elizabeth Bishop)

This island, flat as a map, designed in the hierarchy of science that gives birth to plump red and green tomatoes, regimented fields of grapes. Little whirlwinds of flies floating in the air like lanterns after a spill of rain, the earth running to dark funnels. The seascape attracts

a crowd, like a prophet, offering passers-by time to reflect on a better future. A pheasant soars over a mob of albino-white pigeons pecking uselessly in a field; the donkey goes unnoticed. Vines buried underground are like a mat of veins or the subterranean

fire of the imagination. Crude electric fences hum along overgrown borders. Wildflowers offer up various shades of blood, illustrate with nodding heads the wind's predisposition. Petals trundle to kiss water. The path lifts with dust, settles on leaves like ash

on an upturned palm. Kite surfers copycat on the spume, chase living memory or daylight, or both. Rock-pools wrestle with the unknown. A cat lands without a sound beside the drunken lighthouse-keeper who is tired of dreaming up perfect storms.

Passerby

There, boys crossed the line and became men.
That pitch of longing swims with lightning grass,
has become a nesting ground for creatures that burrow,
birds that flit. Jaded posts lean into a summer sky
and dream of being touched again by the arc
from a hopeful boot. We hold our breath
and shield our eyes to catch the flight. The moon
hovers forever in the distance. I see red flowers
shake in the sigh of an acre gone to seed, rushing
in the wind that brings back kisses from before
when shivers crossed my spine like a wind chime.
The lines lie hidden, like our hearts, waiting
for the parting grass to show what lay there.
What lies there still in the mind's occluded warren?

In the Woods

Leave your week at the fringes.
Here, there is only the prospect of your next step,
the play of light and shade where tinges
of memory surface as in that rope

of goldcrests lifting beyond the treeline,
grey squirrels spiralling over bark.
The earth rushes near the stream
threading the deciduous dark

you will enter like a teenager stumbling home
and emerge again in open meadows
where the sky spills with pent-up rain
onto celandine, dog's mercury and spathes

of lords-and-ladies. If you concentrate
hard enough the red star of your heart
will float from its chest and perch in a vault
of emerald leaves, hidden nests,

and a stag might approach, putting you in mind
of Actaeon: how death didn't recognise
his cries; all that brilliance going up in smoke,
the poor hounds tearing out his eyes.

Derelict

Its battered-down doorway
scuffed with dirt and decay,
eyes cracked windows into a

darkness harbouring the sweat
of old furniture, its stench a fine
must of squatting insects, animals

clambering through its lightless
rooms, the cold walls of its lungs
exhaling like a death under the

apex of its caved-in roof, where,
upstairs, the sky openly loomed,
wrapping air along its rotting

beams, swishing in the attic of
forgotten dreams, brushing up
even the smallest fallen stars.

The Bend

Compelled to return to the spot
where shadows infiltrate
the light and flowers spread their petals
like confetti. The path has ridges,
footprints – comings and goings.
We are not the first ones here.

Nightjars and stock doves
permeate the woody air, trigger
eyes in a way that makes memory
rock to time's unforgiving hands.
If we could see around the corner
the lost river might show its face,

a stone bridge lead us gratefully
into silence. Here is life like a butterfly
in perpetual atmosphere, flitting
one way, then another. Here is the stir
of the heart understanding
the grace in never really knowing.

Exeunt

*"If I have been worried or sad during the day it often calms me to recall
childhood memories."*

- Ingmar Bergman, 'Wild Strawberries' (1957)

(i)

The past has been looking through the present's
tilted blinds, out into a world where faces drift
like feathers up a stream. We skip to the all-
consuming dream and live beyond the voice.
There, daylight gives meaning to the sodden leaves
and shredded plastic nestled at the kerb,
the pools of drenched gold shining
in the sun, on the road, along railway tracks

where a boy once stood like a secret in the dark
imagining his vanishing point, a slight
but constant tremble rising in his throat –
the way a bristle of corncrakes makes us stir –
struck like a tuning fork, honest as a ghost,
waiting to see what would happen.

(ii)

Sorrow in the air, in the water. Behind seaweed-
clumps our clothes in neat little piles. Belongings.
We don't touch each other's skin
but we are free again, as if unborn, swimming
in mother's will. You are not my twin
but I see you in the twisted eye I fix over my shoulder
on weak days, days weak enough to burst
like the bubbles streaming from my mouth

now that I'm under exploring the blur.
See-through fish rifle past like lightning, disappear
in the silvery gloom. My limbs are shipwreck-
heavy but the planet is finally opening up
the way a drowning man makes light of the dark
or the way we cling to expectation.

(iii)

Running in wheat fields with a friend's homebrew
sloshing in grubby brown bottles.

We uncover a wartime concrete bunker
and taste the here-and-now with its snickering stalks
and overlaid hush that runs to a great
and glittering blue. A clutch of perfumed girls
stops to talk, aflame with sex.
A blackbird hovers low enough to touch.

Some pair off, slip into bushes
emerging red-faced, shook. Others are too awkward
in their skin to be taken in. One looks away,
takes out a Zippo and holds its flame to dried-up leaves.
Weird sparks tremble in his eyes.
We read about him later in the paper.

(iv)

An unbearable truth when the front door opens,
rows of jaded saplings on their knees. A homesick
recollection of dinner parties and parents
laughing with friends at Christmas; the butchery
of turkey. Black wine-stained teeth still furnish
a glow but don't ease the strain
of her telling you with bowed, moonstruck eyes
about the abortion. A blizzard

of questions under skies leading
to the deep, darkness running amok.
You lay a hand on the rail and come away
in a stain of rust. The drop beyond whispers
at your feet. A wall of cries tramples
in off the waves. Summer ends. A heart stops.

(v)

The black-winged waters listen, little waves
sewn with broken light that build
before dissolving under night's victory.

A seagull flares in the dark. Here is nature's
hologram: the ethereal quality
of truth and love, panic and guilt.

On the boardwalk, a shadow swings its head
as the first legion of rain marches in.

(vi)

The innate swell of something intimate
spilling up from the depths. The night says
touch me but you're seeing stars
warm to frozen pools of trapped seawater.

You're smoking and you don't smoke. Someone's made
a fire out of driftwood and memory.
Most are on drugs: pot, pills, nothing hard.
Tall tales circumnavigate the glow: nostalgia

blossoms when you're this loaded.
The kick doesn't come as a surprise so much
as calculation, the moored boats tinkering in their sleep
a loose metaphor for tetheredness.

(vii)

A universe rising in the chest. The blink
from misery to unseemly blue
a déjà vu that keeps coming back, keeps coming back.
A lightness in the blood to compare with autumn

mountain walks when oak and ash
are a hundred shades of gold and breath implies
the one sure thing. Wet footprints
have followed you to this spot where anemones

clutter rock pools and crabs nudge sideways
from the light. There is only the reflection
of all we cannot see and, as if made of stone,
your own frightened look.

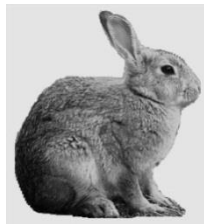
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